

TESTIMONY OF: Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Ph.D., Director
Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement
Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University

BEFORE THE: National Commission on Military, National and Public Service

**Creating an Expectation of Service Hearing: Civic Education and Service in Schools
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Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), part of Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. We applaud the Commission's important work to undertake a comprehensive review of all forms of military, national, and public service in the United States.

We share the Commission's beliefs that fostering a culture of service can strengthen our communities, that service comes in many forms, and that civic engagement is a fundamental tenet of our nation. We believe that achieving the Commission's vision will only be possible if we expand opportunities for meaningful civic education, service, and engagement to all young people, with a focus on equity and inclusion, and in a way that considers a diverse group of youth voices and experiences as well as the robust connections between academic, social-emotional, and civic learning.

Background

We offer this statement from a place of expertise, as a leading voice on the political and civic engagement of young people in America. Since its founding in 2001, Tisch College's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) has been at the forefront of conducting groundbreaking research and working directly with the youth civic engagement field on topics including K-12 civic education and service-learning, civic renewal, youth voting and activism, and the growing field of civic studies.

In the area of K-12 civic education, for example, Tisch College's Associate Dean Peter Levine and I authored a report called *The Republic is (Still) at Risk – and Civics is Part of the Solution*,¹ calling for high-quality civic education that incorporates important pedagogies and curricula such as social-emotional learning, action civics, and media literacy education.

¹ The Republic is (Still) at Risk — and Civics is Part of the Solution, September 2017,
<https://tischcollege.tufts.edu/research/republic-still-risk-and-civics-part-solution>

Our work is widely cited in scholarly publications and in the national news media, and the CIRCLE team advises influential educational organizations through membership and leadership in the boards and commissions, including the American Bar Association's Division of Public Education, American Academy of Arts and Sciences Commission on Democratic Practice, Education Week, Project Information Literacy, Rock the Vote, DoSomething.org, the TurboVote Challenge, and Democracy Works. We have also partnered with organizations and agencies dedicated to service such as the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), with whom we are conducting research on the AmeriCorps program, YouthBuild USA, and Learn & Serve Massachusetts. Tufts University is also home to innovative service programs such as Tufts 1+4 Bridge Year, the Tufts Civic Semester, Tisch Summer Fellows, the Tufts University School of Medicine Service-Learning program, and our signature Tisch Scholars program.

Drawing on our research and on the experienced gleaned from longstanding partnerships with educators and youth-serving organizations, below we offer relevant findings related to: K-12 civic education, service learning, national service, and civic engagement and voting.

Research Findings: K-12 Civic Education

The Commission's interim report rightly points out that a robust civic education can be a pathway to a lifetime of community engagement and political participation. I agree that it carries many potential developmental, academic, and economic benefits. I also agree with the Commission's assessment that K-12 civic education varies greatly across the country, that access is too limited, and that standards are too uneven. From an equity standpoint, we should all be concerned that high-quality civic education programs only reach certain communities and/or certain groups of more privileged students.

In recent years, Tisch College's CIRCLE has partnered with the states of Florida, Illinois, and Massachusetts as they successfully passed and implemented civic education bills that include mandated coursework at the middle and high school levels. In Florida and Illinois, these partnerships spanned several years and focused on assessment and evaluation with an eye to continuous, research-informed implementation, capacity-building, and improvement. In Massachusetts, we conducted a survey of educators and administrators in 2018. In our experience, educators want to equip their students with the knowledge and skills to be active participants in their communities, they want to teach through engaging, project-based learning approaches, and they want to gain more skills and competency through training.

Through our work with educators, school leaders, partners, and funders in each of these states, and our two decades of research in this area, we have learned valuable lessons about implementing civic education in a way that equitably serves students and teachers in every school, especially in underserved communities.

We offer the following key findings:

- **Start early.** We encourage the Commission to consider recommendations that introduce civic education in elementary school. Exposing students to civic concepts and skills, as well as the basic terminology of civic involvement and self-governance, can provide important building blocks for future academic work and service-learning. Elementary grades are an ideal time to help students build core civic assets such as civic responsibility, a sense of community, conflict resolution, empathy, and an ability to speak their mind when they see injustice. In my view, the Kindergarten classroom is the first “public site of democracy,” meaning that most children, usually for the first time, must balance learning basic academic skills and learning to be a responsible member of a community that is governed by common rules, expectations, and goals. There are abundant opportunities to develop the civic and service mindset in the elementary grades by, for instance, helping students develop and abide by a classroom code of conduct, and creating opportunities for service to others (such as cleaning up the classrooms and helping other students learn new skills). When school is framed as a community, and opportunities for service and civic involvement are integrated in students’ daily experiences, students can learn that they have rights and responsibilities as members of a community and hold a stake in the wellbeing of the community.
- **Laws and standards requiring or encouraging comprehensive civic education improve practice.** In 2013, the CIRCLE-staffed Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge issued a report calling for laws and standards that support teachers who want to provide their students with comprehensive preparation for civic life. Simultaneously, since 2012, Tisch College’s CIRCLE has worked with two states (FL and IL) that mandated civic education and provided large-scale teacher training to support the new mandate. Our research finds that educators are often unable to implement best practices, such as service-learning and controversial issue discussions, for various reasons. Teachers need **resources** (time, funding to purchase curriculum, budget for field work); **preparation** (e.g., training in best service-learning practices); **school-community connection**; and importantly, **protection from backlash** to provide comprehensive civic education. In our 2013 CIRCLE Commission study, we found that up to one-quarter of high school civics teachers felt that they could not discuss anything political in nature in their civics/American government classes. Educators shared that teaching civics, depending on the discussion topic or the goal of a project, can be misinterpreted as a teacher’s attempt to indoctrinate students into a specific ideology. This is one reason why well-articulated laws and learning standards can help teachers understand the goal of civic education and how to prepare students for civic life while providing sufficient resources and institutional support to do so.

In Illinois and Florida, we saw first-hand how state laws and standards can reach every teacher and student in every district, including those who would not otherwise have had the resources to learn and adopt research-supported practices. Our data suggests that laws and standards are especially important in rural areas where school districts tend to be small and farther away from service providers, and where social studies teachers tend to be isolated from peers who could share resources and provide support. Laws and standards are equally important in districts that struggle with budget deficits, because additional

funding can provide teachers with training, as well as in large districts where they may create positions to manage tasks, such as finding community partners that can serve as service-learning sites, at a larger scale. In both Illinois and Florida, the laws and the attendant resources made it possible for students in districts that are farthest from opportunities and resources to get a high-quality civic education. Without these laws and resources, civic education practices in these states would be years behind where they are today.

- **Robust professional development essential.** Support for teacher training is an essential mechanism for enabling wide-ranging impact on the civic preparation of all students. Teachers need to gain both skills and confidence in teaching civics as prescribed by any new law or regulation. We find that in-service training and a culture of learning and continuous improvement are important ingredients of strong civic preparation.
 - **Static materials not sufficient.** Providing teachers with a handbook or a PowerPoint slide deck on how to teach civic content or implement specific pedagogies will not lead to changes in the classroom.
 - **High-quality training & ongoing mentoring most effective.** In both Florida and Illinois, teachers needed considerable support, often in the form of in-person professional training, followed by ongoing mentoring and coaching, to improve their teaching of civics. In Massachusetts, we found that the vast majority of classroom teachers do not feel there is support for professional training in civics.
 - **Team-teaching especially desirable for service-learning.** In our study of Massachusetts educators, teachers expressed a strong desire to use more experiential learning including service-learning, in their teaching. Because service-learning often involves coordination with community partners, as well as lesson planning, teachers find it desirable to have opportunities to work in a team to share resources and divide up tasks. Our study, however, also found that most teachers presently lack access to such collaborative spaces and practices.
- **Support communities of practice for continuous improvement.** As with any new instructional innovation, an infrastructure to support a community of practice is critical to build capacity and maintain high standards. In Illinois and Florida, teachers and administrators had opportunities to receive training and/or be part of a community of practice that allowed them to share best practices, solve challenges together, and create shared goals. Both states also provided a website that served as a one-stop shop for resources and professional development opportunities; Tufts University's Tisch College is currently developing such a website to house resources for teachers in Massachusetts. This type of infrastructure, and central management of such infrastructure, was one key factor for success in Illinois and Florida.
- **Funding must be addressed.** Our research suggests that changes to civic education policy are essential, but not sufficient, to change educational practices in civics. State- or federal-

level policy and curricular changes must be supported with funding for academic rigor, robust implementation, dynamic materials, and ongoing professional development. Ensuring that adequate support reaches low-income communities is especially important, and without that, we risk widening the gaps in civic preparation across the country.

As you develop your final recommendations, we hope you will keep in mind that embedding civics in the curriculum empowers students with agency in their own communities, and it prepares them with many skills that are valued in today's workforce: team-building, collaboration, critical thinking, public speaking, and communication. We need to return to educating young people for democracy, and we must support our educators in their efforts to do this work in a way that reaches of all students in all communities.

Research and Recommendations: Service Learning

The interim report names service-learning in NFEAs as a tool for building students' service mindset while they gain strong academic skills and knowledge across various disciplines. Research suggests that service-learning supports multiple facets of student growth, like civic identity formation (e.g., "service-mindset"; Brown, Kim & Pinhas, 2005; Melachior & Bailis, 2002),² academic achievement and competency (Astin & Vogelgesant, Ikeda & Yee, 2000; Davila & Mora 2007; Furco, 2007; Kraft & Wheeler 2003, Laird & Black, 2002),³ school engagement and enjoyment (Billig, Root & Jesse, 2005),⁴ college completion (Davila & Mora, 2007),⁵ career decision-making, leadership (Astin et. al., 2000), self-efficacy and skills (Kahne, Middaugh & Cody, 2005),⁶ connection to community civic leaders (Heness, 2001),⁷ and civic

² Brown, S., Kim, W., & Pinhas, S. (2005). Texas Title IV service-learning evaluation, 2004-2005: Interim report. Denver, CO: RMC Research Corporation; Melchior, A, & Bailis, L. N. (2002). Impact of service-learning on civic attitudes and behaviors of middle and high school youth: Findings from three national evaluations. In A. Furco & S. H. Billig (Eds.), *Advances in service-learning research: Vol.1. Service-learning: The essence of the pedagogy* (pp. 201–222). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

³ Astin et al., (2000). Retrieved at <https://www.heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/HSLAS/HSLAS.PDF>; Davila, A. and Mora, M. (2007). Civic engagement and high school academic progress: An analysis using NELS data. College Park, MD: The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement.; Furco, A. (2007, January) The role of service-learning in enhancing student achievement. Presentation given at the National Center for Learning and Citizenship Board Meeting, Santa Barbara, CA.; Kraft, N., & Wheeler, J. (2003). Service-learning and resilience in disaffected youth: A research study. In S. H. Billig & J. Eyler (Eds.), *Advances in service-learning research: Vol. 3. Deconstructing service-learning: Research exploring context, participation, and impacts* (pp. 213–238). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.; Laird, M., & Black, S. (2002a, October). Service-learning evaluation project: Program effects for at risk students. Presentation at 2nd International Service-Learning Research conference, Nashville, TN.

⁴ Billig, S., Root, S., & Jesse, D. (2005). The impact of participation in service-learning on high school students' civic engagement. Retrieved from: <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP33Billig.pdf>

⁵ https://civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_Mora.Davila.pdf

⁶ Kahne, J., Middaugh, E., & Croddy, M. (2005). The California Survey of Civic Education, Report to Educating for Democracy: California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. Los Angeles Constitutional Rights Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.civicsurvey.org/sites/default/files/publications/civic_survey_final.pdf

⁷ Henness, S. A. (2001). K-12 service-learning: A strategy for rural community renewal and revitalization. Washington, DC: Corporation for National Service. (ERIC Reproduction Service No. ED461466)

engagement later in life (The Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, 2013).⁸ Studies also indicate that the impact of service-learning may be more significant for low-income students and schools in low-income neighborhoods than for their more affluent peers (Hecht, 2002; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2005).⁹

In a large study of over 22,000 college students involved in service-learning, Astin and colleagues found that service participation has a positive effect on academic performance (including GPA and critical thinking skills), civic values and identity, self-efficacy, leadership, and intent to continue serving or pursuing a service career after college. This study's data also suggests that, in most of the disciplines they studied, involvement in service as part of an academic course resulted in better outcomes. Since this is a large multi-institution study, researchers were able to distill key principles for effective service-learning:

- Service experience has a stronger impact if undertaken as part of an academic course.
- Service participation yields the greatest benefit when students are able to reflect upon and discuss the service experience with other students and when they receive emotional support.
- Service-learning enhances students' intent to work in a public service or nonprofit career, even if students did not initially intend to pursue such a career.
- The perceived relevance of the subject matter in the service learning experience is directly correlated with whether or not students have a positive experience. Furthermore, students also have a positive service experience when instructors encourage discussion of the service experience in class, and when they frequently and explicitly connect the academic content with the service experience.

While most of these findings from the study of college service learning have been replicated in K-12 service-learning research, I highlight three additional points for consideration. First, service-learning can serve as a bridge to college, through academic achievement, school engagement and enjoyment, and connection to local government and leaders. Research suggests that service-learning is often able to help develop students' sense of self, sense of purpose, understanding of a cause they feel passionate about, and commitment to their community and to service, all of which boosts students' academic engagement and achievement. Deep reflection, sharing with peers, and emotional support are key factors that lead to service-learning yielding positive outcomes. Second, while a majority of the existing service-learning studies focus on high school or college students, studies that focus on elementary and middle-school students yield similarly successful results, and show that

⁸ Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge. (2013). All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement. Retrieved from <http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/CIRCLE-youthvoting-individualPages.pdf>

⁹ Hecht, D. (2002). The missing link: Exploring the context of learning in service-learning. Presentation at 2nd International Service-Learning Research conference, Nashville, TN.; Scales, P.C. & Roehlkepartain, E.C. (2005). Can service-learning help reduce the achievement gap? In J. Kielsmeier & M. Neal (Eds.), *Growing to Greatness 2005: The State of Service-Learning Project*. Saint Paul, MN: National Youth Leadership Council.

students as young as Kindergarten-age can start to solidify their civic and service mindset through service-learning projects that promote key civic competencies like empathy, collaboration, and the ability to reflect and evaluate. Third and finally, while service-learning has a robust body of research that supports its potential and documents its success, it is but one of many approaches to experiential learning. Service-learning was widely implemented by educators in many disciplines outside of Social Studies by 2008 or so¹⁰, and is an excellent pedagogical choice for cross-curricular learning (e.g., a community garden project to learn about the food supply chain and plant biology while supplying fresh food to a local food pantry). Learn and Serve America, a federal funding mechanism for service-learning, built capacity and resources at scale until the funding for this program was eliminated in 2011, effectively preventing many NFEAs from continuing to implement service-learning. However, experts believe that service-learning may have been in decline for other reasons too, such as uneven implementation of curriculum that often resulted in “service projects” lacking key components such as academic learning, analysis of root cause, and reflection.¹¹

Important lessons have been learned in service-learning research and practice that should be considered by this Commission within the context of contemporary practices in civic education. Namely, a federal funding mechanism similar to Learn and Serve America is important in encouraging experimentation and research across many settings and disciplines so that civic education practice continues to be evidence-based and relevant to today’s student learning needs. Other civic learning pedagogies are similarly effective at instilling important civic values, skills, and competencies¹², and may be better suited to certain classrooms and communities. I hope that the Commission considers ways in which service-learning and other approaches can be revitalized and implemented with rigorous academic learning in all grades and across academic subjects.

Research and Recommendations: National Service

The Commission’s interim report indicates a need to reach out to young Americans who might want to serve in order to help them become aware of service opportunities and of the benefits of service. Calling national service “America’s best-kept secret” is apt because, as you rightly point out, “far too few Americans even know these opportunities exist.” Our research supports this assertion. Our collaboration with the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) pointed to the need to expand the network of organizations that host AmeriCorps volunteers, particularly in the for-profit sector, by raising the profile of the program and expanding the network of employers who host or would consider hosting an AmeriCorps member.

¹⁰ Personal communications with Peter Levine, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs at Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² For examples of these pedagogies, please refer to Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg (2017) and Kahne, J., Cohen, C. & Marshall, J. (2019). *Let’s go there – Making a case for race, ethnicity, and a lived civics approach to civic education.* Riverside, CA: Civic Engagement Research Group.

While most employers we surveyed had heard of AmeriCorps, they were less clear about the value and benefits of the program and the motivations of AmeriCorps volunteers. Likely reflecting the lack of direct experience with AmeriCorps volunteers, very few organizations that have never hosted an AmeriCorps member stated that their organizations would be open to hosting one in the future: 6% said they are open to hosting, 31% said they are not, and a majority (63%) were unsure. It was also far more common for nonprofit organizations than for-profit companies to have hosted an AmeriCorps volunteer in the past; and for-profit companies' hiring managers were less sure about hosting an AmeriCorps volunteer. However, when an organization does host an AmeriCorps volunteer, the results are positive. A vast majority of host sites (86%) in our survey said they would be open to hosting an AmeriCorps volunteer again.

Recruitment of new national service host sites should be a priority; our research suggests that one way to do this is by encouraging existing host sites to actively recruit new sites among their network of organizations and companies. One of the most common ways for organizations to start hosting an AmeriCorps volunteer was through outreach from a peer organization.

We must also continue to make the economic case for service. Our study of the AmeriCorps program points to opportunities to highlight the skills attained through service, as well as to help organizations create or expand networking opportunities so that young people who participate in service programs can leverage their experiences for future employment. We know that employers value the skills that are developed by serving as AmeriCorps volunteers, but too often these skills are not highlighted by AmeriCorps alumni in their resumes and cover letters. For instance, instead of emphasizing the time commitment of AmeriCorps volunteers (i.e., 1,700 hours of service), candidates should describe the impact they made or the results they achieved (e.g., AmeriCorps member organized and ran an event that convened 300 guests, 120 of whom made donations). The program should also continue to provide AmeriCorps volunteers with opportunities to gain credentials for the skills they build and encourage host organizations to recognize those skills in their hiring. Finally, we recommend mobilizing AmeriCorps alumni even more to serve as ambassadors who encourage their organizations and companies to hire AmeriCorps alumni and/or host active AmeriCorps volunteers.

Research Findings: Civic Engagement, Service & Voting

Finally, it is important to consider the relationship between service, civic engagement and voting, and the health of the Republic. The 2018 midterm elections were a watershed moment for youth political participation. Our analysis of voter files suggests that an estimated 28% of youth (ages 18-29) turned out to vote in 2018; a sizeable increase over the 2014 midterms, when we estimate that just 13% of eligible young voters went to the polls. In fact, we believe that by any measure (whether Exit Polls, the Census Current Population Survey, or voter files) 2018 marks the highest level of midterm participation among youth in the past quarter century. Over the past few months, we have also analyzed state-level turnout and found that, compared to 2014, youth voter turnout increased in every single state for which we have data (42 states). Further, in the vast majority of the states we examined, the surge in youth voting outpaced that

of the general (all ages) electorate, which also had a record-breaking turnout. It is clear that young people are yearning for opportunities to make their voices heard and to make a difference.

Of course, voting is just one measure of civic participation. Our research also finds that, across many indicators of political engagement, youth participation has increased since the 2016 election. In a 2018 poll of young people ages 18-24, we found that nearly one fourth (22%) of all youth said they had engaged in at least one form of activism in the past two years. The percentage of youth who said they attended a demonstration or march tripled since we asked the same question in 2016: from 5% to 15%.

Our research suggests that the youth-led gun violence prevention movement catalyzed by the Parkland school shooting—especially the peer-to-peer outreach that characterizes this movement—may have helped fuel the rise in youth participation in 2018. According to our surveys, almost two-thirds (64%) of youth said they had paid ‘some’ or ‘a lot’ of attention to news about the Parkland shooting. In addition, youth who said they were either actively involved with or agreed with the movement were much more likely to self-report that they voted in the 2018 midterm elections—21 percentage points more likely. Young people of color were at the core of much of this work, and voter registration and outreach efforts connected to gun violence prevention may have been especially effective in encouraging their participation: Black and Latino youth in our poll were twice as likely as White youth to say that they are a part of the movement.

Interestingly, these higher rates of participation and activism occurred at a time when, according to our polling, large percentages of young people are expressing cynicism and concern about the state of our democracy. After the 2018 midterm elections, we found that 82% of youth (ages 18-24) said they were concerned about the values of the American people, and a majority of young people surveyed (57%) said they are losing faith in American democracy. But their concerns are mixed with a sense of hope about the future. While only 40% of young people thought that ‘the United States government will improve’ over the next two years, nearly three quarters (70%) reported feeling hopeful that ‘things will get better in America.’

This suggests that young people see themselves as changemakers in their communities and in the nation. It is possible that their optimism is driven by a growing recognition that they can influence the political process, especially as they see other young people become increasingly engaged as advocates and voters. Of course, too many young people are also being left out of the political process and out of civic life. While our data show the importance of reaching out to young people, of engaging them in campaigns and the political process, and of peer-to-peer networks, they also point to some deficiencies in how electoral outreach usually occurs, such as an overreliance on past voting or party registration that inevitably leaves new, mostly young voters behind. To achieve greater scale and equity in youth engagement will require changing or overcoming these and other barriers.

All of us, including political parties, election officials, educators, journalists, parents, and peers, have a role to play in creating more pathways to democratic participation and expanding the youth electorate to more accurately reflect the U.S. population. This is one of many reasons why supporting young people to be active participants in their communities—whether through civic education, national service, or other means—is so important. It is another reason why the work of this Commission is so relevant.

Conclusion

At a time when our civic health is badly bruised, and our political discourse seems more polarized than ever, the prospects for knitting together our fraying democracy may well rest on the next generation. To support young people in their development as engaged citizens ready to address big challenges together, our research points to several clear and connected priorities: to invest in high-quality, comprehensive K-12 civic education that starts at the elementary school level and that reaches all students; to implement meaningful service-learning programs grounded in academic learning, across grades and subjects; and to elevate national service in a way that reflects diverse communities and the many opportunities to serve and contribute to our shared democracy.